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AUTHOR Blyth, Dale A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Utilizing a sample of 798 seventh graders in both K-8 schools and junior high schools in a metropolitan area, this study examined characteristics of student victims of violence and threat of violence and the relationship between victimization and student perceptions of school environment. Comparisons of school environmental characteristics with neighborhood crime rates were also drawn. Results indicate that seventh-graders in junior high schools are more likely to be victimized than their peers in K-8 schools. White male students with low self-esteem were found to be the most frequent victims of violence or threat. Junior high school victims were more likely to experience feelings of danger in the school and to see themselves as anonymous in the school environment. (Author/DS)

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ANOTHER LOOK AT SCHOOL CRIME: STUDENT AS VICTIM

Dale A. Blyth and Karen Smith Thiel

Center for the Study of Youth Development

and

Diane Bush and Roberta G. Simmons

University of Minnesota

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Abstract

This paper attempts to assess the developmental costs of educating early adolescents in a school environment which includes violence and the threat of violence. Utilizing a sample of 798 seventh graders in both K-8 and junior highs from a metropolitan public school system, characteristics of student victims and the relationship between victimization experience and a student's perception of school will be explored. Comparisons of school structural and environmental characteristics with neighborhood crime rates will be made for selected schools in the sample. Results indicate variation in victimization experiences by sex, race, and self-esteem and an association between the type of school and the student's rate of victimization.

A number of recent reports focusing on crime in our nation's schools have pointed to rapidly increasing rates of vandalism, assaults on teachers, and assaults on students within the school, (Brickman, 1976; U.S. Senate Subcommittee to investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 1975). However, these figures, while alarming, are based on official or reported crime statistics and probably underrepresent the actual exposure of students to crime in the schools.

A 1972 survey of the victimization experiences of early adolescents aged 10-14 in an inner city Minneapolis neighborhood (Reynolds and Blyth, 1976) indicates that the actual rate of victimization was 2.7 incidents per child per year. One third of these incidents occurred in the school. Projecting from these findings, each student in this early adolescent age range could be expected to experience approximately one incident of threat, beating, or theft during a given school year. Of the victimized youth who were surveyed, however, only 8% had reported any incidents of victimization to the police with another 11% reporting incidents to some other official agency like the school. If only one-in-five students reported the incident to some type of official, it suggests that the actual rate of student victimization in schools could be as much as five times higher than that noted in official school or police sources.

Student as Victim

One way to remedy non or under-reporting of victimization and to thereby more accurately assess students' actual exposure to crimes within the schools is to survey students about their own experiences. One recent attempt to focus in on the student as victim is a survey conducted by the National Institute of Education (1977).[1] One segment of the "Violent

[1]Comments on this report are based on the Executive Summary and initial press releases. The full report has not yet been released.

Schools-Safe Schools" project consisted of interviews with students in a national sample of 642 junior and senior high schools. Students were asked about their victimization experiences and this information was correlated with certain individual, school, and community variables. This study concluded that junior high schools were more victimizing environments than senior high schools, and, in particular, that 7th graders were the most victimized students.

The present study builds on the NIE report in three ways: first, it examines the relationship between victimization and different types of schools for 7th graders; second, it explores the social and psychological characteristics of victims and non-victims; and third, focusing on junior high school students, it attempts to assess some of impacts of victimization experiences and victimizing environments on early adolescent aged youth.

METHOD

Sample

As part of a larger longitudinal study on the Transition into Early Adolescence (Blyth, et al., 1977), data were collected on the victimization experiences of 798 black and white seventh grade students.[2] The students in this study attended two different types of schools: 8th grade top schools (K-8) and junior high schools (containing grades 7, 8, and 9).[3]

[2]For the purposes of this study only those students interviewed in the late fall of 7th grade were used (n = 321) in order to maximize the usefulness of questions dealing with perceptions of school as a dangerous place that were only asked of these students.

[3]The junior high schools studied were themselves of two types: predominantly white schools and predominantly black schools, but have been analyzed together in this study. The K-8 schools were more predominantly white.

One-hour interviews were conducted with each student during the school day by professional interviewers.

Measurement

Information on students' victimization experiences was gained in the following manner. Students were asked three sets of parallel questions about any instances of threats, thefts or beatings that they had experienced since the beginning of seventh grade:

> "Since you started seventh grade, has anyone threatened to beat you up or hurt you if you didn't give them your money or something else that belonged to you?"
>
> "Since you started seventh grade, has anything that costs more than a dollar been stolen from your desk or locker when you weren't around?"
>
> "Since you started seventh grade, has anyone actually beaten you up or really hurt you?"

Students were then dichotomized into victims and non-victims based on whether they had experienced any incidents of any type. When students were analyzed in conjunction with the victimizing nature of the school environment, only victims of threats and beatings (as instances of personal abuse) were used.

Extra-curricular participation and dating behavior were examined in relation to victimization within each type of school. Extra-curricular participation was defined as membership in one or more school based extra-curricular activities. Dating behavior consisted of one or more forms of heterosexual contact ranging from activities with groups of males and females to individual dating. The three items in the Guttman scale were:

> "Do you ever go to dances or parties where there are both boys and girls present?"
>
> "Do you ever go out with another boy(girl) and a couple of girls(boys) or meet a group of boys and girls at night?"
>
> "Do you ever go out with a girl(boy) alone?"

A student's global self-esteem was measured by a six-item Gutman scale with known reliability and validity (see Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg, 1973). The items deal with the degree to which the student feels generally positive or negative about him or herself. For this analysis, self-esteem was dichotomized into high and low categories.

A student's sense of danger within the school was measured in terms of whether a student indicated agreement with the following statement:

> "This school is dangerous because no one watches the kids who sometimes beat you up or take things away from you."

A student's perception of anonymity within his school environment is based on a four-item scale which loaded significantly on a single factor. Students were asked to rate the following four items with responses ranging from "never feel like this" to "feel like this a lot":

> "This school has so many students in it that I feel I don't know lots of kids."
>
> "Lots of kids don't know me at school because it is so large."
>
> "At this school the teachers don't seem to know who you are or what your name is."
>
> "At this school most students don't seem to know who you are or what your name is."

Students were considered to feel anonymous if they responded positively to 2 or more items in the scale.

A student's tendency to justify violence was measured by the following question:

> "If somebody was giving a kid a hard time and that kid hit this other person to make him quit, would you consider this. . .
>
> really OK
> kind of OK
> not really OK
> not at all OK?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Victimization by School Type

The NIE study explored junior high/senior high differences, but did not examine the impact of different school types on students at one grade level. In the present study, we look at the victimization experiences of 7th grade students in two different school types: K-8 schools and junior high schools and note the ways in which differences in a school environment (namely the larger student population and departmentalization of the junior high) can influence the risk of victimization within a grade cohort (Table I).

Overall 34% of the 7th grade students in our sample experienced at least one incident of victimization with the likelihood of experiencing thefts being somewhat greater than the likelihood of experiencing threats or beatings: 19% versus 14.6% and 6.0% respectively. When we separate the 7th grade students by type of school, however, we found that the rate of victimization for 7th graders in the K-8 schools was only 24.3%, whereas the rate for 7th graders in the junior high schools was 39.3%. Seventh graders in the junior high schools are, therefore, more likely to be victimized than their same age peers in K-8 schools. Furthermore, these differences between school types are primarily a function of the number of thefts and threats.

In order to further explore the effect of the type of school a student attends on the chances of his or her becoming a victim, we followed Power, et al. (1972) suggestion and explored the interaction between a school variable and neighborhood conditions. To do this we classified all of the schools as being either high or low violence schools based on the average

number of incidents reported by the students in our sample and also categorized the neighborhoods serving as catchment areas for each of the schools as being high or low crime areas based on police data. By examining the combinations of the level of violence in a school and the nature of the crime rate in the surrounding area, we discovered that four out of six of the K-8 schools were located in high crime neighborhoods but only one of these was a "high violence" school. This is in marked contrast to what we found for the junior high schools. Only two of the junior high schools were in high crime areas but four of the junior highs were classified as high violence schools and only one of those was in a high crime area. While these results are illustrative at best, they do seem to indicate that there is something about the junior high environment which leads to a higher rate of victimization of seventh graders even when we control for the crime rate in the neighborhood.

Therefore, our figures demonstrate that victimization for seventh graders is more of a junior high school problem and lend support to the NIE study's focus on the junior high school as a highly victimizing environment.

Profiles of Victims

It is important, however, to ask whether characteristics of victims in junior high schools differ from those in K-8 schools. Specifically, what are the relationships between being a victim and dating, extra-curricular participation, self-esteem, sex, and race within each school type?

When profiles of victims were constructed for 7th graders in junior high schools and K-8 schools (Table II), we found that within K-8 schools, victims do not differ significantly from non-victims in terms of dating behavior, extra-curricular activities, self-esteem, sex, or race. While

54% of K-8 victims reported low self-esteem as compared to only 39% of the non-victims, this difference was not statistically significant. The profile of a victim in a K-8 school, therefore, is that of the average student and does not differ significantly from that of the non-victim.

If we compare victims to non-victims within the junior high schools, we also find no differences in the percentage who are dating or engaged in extra-curricular activities but do find significant differences in terms of self-esteem, sex, and race. A low self-esteem, white, male student is more likely to be a victim in the junior high than the average student. Sixty-four percent of the victims in the junior high school were males as compared to only forty-four percent of the non-victims. Sixty-nine percent of the junior high victims were white, while only 56% of the non-victims were white.

Almost forty-six percent of the victims in junior highs reported a low level of self-esteem compared to less than thirty percent of the non-victims. One could speculate on whether being victimized damages a person's self-esteem or people with low self-esteem are easier to victimize. Although we cannot fully answer this question, a longitudinal analysis of covariance using sixth grade self-esteem as a covariate indicated that no change occurred in self-esteem as a function of being a victim. This would suggest that low self-esteem individuals may be more vulnerable to victimization than high self-esteem students.

Perceptions of School

In addition to characteristics of the individual victim, one can also examine how being a victim within different school settings is related to a student's perception of danger and anonymity in that environment.

Perceived anonymity. The first point to be noted in comparing the perceived anonymity of students in the two environments is that virtually none of the seventh graders in the K-8 schools perceived their school environment to be one of high anonymity. This contrasts sharply with the junior high schools where more than one-third of the students reported a high degree of anonymity. Furthermore, the perception of anonymity is significantly associated with being a victim only in the junior highs (Table III). Almost half of the students who were victimized in a junior high school reported what can be considered a high degree of anonymity within their school context. None of the twenty-eight victims in the K-8 schools reported a high degree of anonymity. This finding suggests that at least some of the difference between the rates of victimization in the two types of schools could be due to the victimization of students who feel isolated from others in their school and have no "protective" or "supportive" networks.

If this issue is further explored by examining the type of crime which is associated with the perception of anonymity in junior high schools, we discover that it is the victims of threats or beatings and not the victims of theft who perceive their school to be anonymous (Table IV). In particular, almost sixty percent of the students who experienced a threat or were beaten thought their environment was anonymous as compared to only 27% for those students who did not experience such incidents or 40% for those who were the victim of a theft. Thus, it is the more personal crimes which seem to be related to a sense of anonymity.

Perceived danger. When we examine whether or not a student perceived his school environment to be a "dangerous place," we discovered no overall

differences between K-8 schools and junior high schools. There was, however, a significant association between being a victim and the perception of danger only within the junior high schools (Table V). A full thirty-eight percent of the victims in the junior highs felt their school was a dangerous place as compared to only 22% of the non-victims. The association in the K-8 schools was in the same direction but was not significant.

If we once again break this down by type of crime, we discover that both victims of theft and victims of a threat or beating are more likely to perceive their junior high school as a dangerous place (Table VI) than are non-victims. That is, forty percent of the students who were the victim of a theft perceived school to be dangerous as did forty percent of those who were the victim of a threat or beating. These figures compare with only 25% of the non-victims of either type who perceived the school to be a dangerous place. When we looked at the same figures for the students in K-8 schools (not presented), we found no association with a sense of danger for either type of crime. Thus it would appear as though perceiving one's environment as dangerous is related to being any type of a victim only within the junior high environment.

However, the fact that junior high school victims are more likely to have a heightened sense of danger and a greater perception of anonymity, does not necessarily mean that these perceptions were caused by the act of being victimized. In order to explore whether being a victim is related to a differential change in these variables over time, two analysis of covariance procedures were performed using the student's sixth grade sense of danger and perception of anonymity as covariates. The results indicated that a student's perceived sense of danger did <u>not</u> change differentially as a function of being a victim, but did change differentially as a function

of sex. A student's feelings of anonymity, however, changes differentially depending upon whether or not the student had been victimized early in seventh grade. In particular, a student who had been victimized was more likely to have increased feelings of anonymity in seventh grade.

Since it is impossible to determine whether the change in anonymity took place before or after the student was victimized, we are still unable to determine whether the increased sense of anonymity with the change from K-6 to junior high school made the student more susceptible to being victimized or was actually a consequence of being a victim. We do know that many junior high students reported an increased feeling of anonymity upon entering the school in seventh grade.

The School Environment

Garbarino (1977) has employed an ecological perspective to reflect on the manner in which certain school based variables may influence victimization within the school. We know that there are school type differences in the incidence of victimization and also that victims in junior high schools perceive their school's environment differently than do victims in K-8 schools. Are there other characteristics of the school environment which may differentially influence the perceptions of victims and non-victims? Specifically, does the victimizing nature of the school mediate the tendency of victims to view their schools as dangerous or anonymous places?

When junior high schools were divided into those schools which could be considered non-victimizing and those which were more victimizing in terms of their overall incidence of threats, it was found that the psychological

consequences of being a victim were more apparent in victimizing than in non-victimizing schools.[4]

School environment and perceived danger. While victims and non-victims perceived their junior highs as dangerous places about equally often in non-victimizing schools, there were significant differences between the perceptions of victims and those of non-victims within victimizing schools. In a victimizing school setting, victims were much more likely to view their schools as dangerous than were non-victims; 58.3% to 23.5% respectively (Table VII).

When victims were analyzed separately, the nature of the school environment increased the perception of school as a dangerous place. Victims in victimizing environments were more likely than victims in non-victimizing environments to feel that their school was dangerous. The effect of school environment did not hold for non-victims whose perceptions of their school was the same whether they attended non-victimizing or victimizing schools. In fact, approximately three-quarters of non-victims in each setting did not feel that their school was dangerous.

There are two possible explanations for the greater perception of danger by victims in victimizing schools. The first is that victims in these schools may attempt to externalize blame for their victimization experiences by faulting the school; that is, to rationalize their experience by labeling the school as a dangerous place. In fact, the wording of the question gives an indication that this may be the case:

> "A different kid said: 'This school is dangerous because no one watches the kids who sometimes beat you up or take things away from you.' Do you ever feel like this in your school?"

[4]In this analysis victimized students were defined as those who had experienced at least one incident of threat or beating and non-victimized students as those who had not been threatened or beaten. We divided all schools in the sample into schools with high and low incidence of threats yielding the dichotomy victimizing and non-victimizing schools.

An alternative explanation is that teachers and officials in victimizing schools may actually be permitting more victimization to occur. Hence, victims in these schools may be reacting to a real presence of danger in the school.

School environment and perceived anonymity. In regard to students' perceptions of anonymity within the school, we found significant differences between the perceptions of victims and those of non-victims in schools with both high and low rates of victimization (Table VIII). That is, victims of personal abuse were much more likely to feel anonymous than non-victims regardless of the rate of victimization in the school. Since increased feelings of anonymity occurred for victims regardless of school environment, an individual's victim status appears to be a more important determinant of feelings of anonymity than the victimizing nature of the school he attends.

Justification of violence. Aside from feeling a sense of danger or annonymity within the school, another consequence of students' exposure to victimizing environments may be a tendency to accept violent actions as legitimate or justified.

Students were questioned as to the acceptability of hitting another person to make them stop "giving a kid a hard time." We found that students who have been victimized were no more likely to justify violent actions than students who have not been victimized (Table IX).

When students were compared in low victimizing and high victimizing school environments, there were no significant differences in the justification of violence between victims and non-victims. It should be noted that the percentage of students who justified violence is high for all of

the groups studied; ranging from 48% to 60%. Only non-victims in schools with low rates of victimization had a majority oppose the violence.

Since justification of violence is an attitude which may potentially be influenced more by societal factors than are perceptions of danger or anonymity which are confined to a specific school, we can ask whether other aspects of the ecological setting of the school increase a student's tendency to justify violence. For example, does the extent of crime in a school's neighborhood differentially affect whether victims and non-victims perceive violence as justified.

In examining this possibility, neighborhoods were divided into high and low crime categories based on the crime rate in the neighborhood which served as the catchment area for each school. There were no significant differences between non-victims and victims' tendency to justify violence in either type of neighborhood. This suggests that we may need to go beyond the immediate neighborhood setting in order to achieve an understanding of the variables affecting students' justification of violence. This is in line with Wilson's (1977) suggestion that school victimization and its consequences be examined in terms of a societal predisposition toward violence.

Summary

For 7th graders, victimization is greater among junior high school students than students in K-8 schools. The characteristics of victims and non-victims are similar in each school type with the exception that victims in junior high schools are more likely than non-victims to express low levels of self-esteem. Victims in the junior high schools were also more likely to feel a sense of danger in the school and a higher degree of

anonymity. This sense of danger was further heightened for victims who attended schools with high victimization rates. Students' tendencies to justify violent actions were unaffected by being a victim or by school or neighborhood crime characteristics.

In examining the societal implications of victimization, Smith (1976) notes a pattern of lessened fear and increased suspicion or distrust on the part of adults who were victimized as children. Citing social learning theory, he hypothesizes that this pattern may characterize more aggressive individuals and warns of the consequences of the relationship between childhood victimization and subsequent adult approval of violent behavior.

The greater sense of danger and feeling of anonymity that victims in junior high schools express about their school may tend to generalize for this group beyond the school setting. Follow-up of victimized students who express these feelings would be one way to enhance our understanding of the way in which such feelings, formulated at key transitional or developmental phases in a child's life, affect later social interactions.

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TABLE I

Percentage of Students Experiencing An Incident by Nature of Victimization and School Type

School Type	Threats	Thefts	Beatings	Any Type of Victimizatio
K-8 (n=115)	9.6%	12.2%	6.1%	24.3%
Junior High (n=206)	17.5%	22.8%	5.8%	39.3%
Total - 7th Grade (N=321)	14.6%	19.0%	6.0%	34.0%

TABLE II

Profiles of Victims* and Non-Victims within each School Type

	K-8			Junior High		
		%			%	
Dating	Victims	78.6%	p>.10	Victims	81.5%	p>.10
	Non-Victims	83.9%		Non-Victims	77.4%	
Extra-Curricular Activities	Victims	82.1%	p>.10	Victims	43.2%	p>.10
	Non-Victims	78.2%		Non-Victims	35.2%	
Low Self-Esteem	Victims	53.6%	p>.10	Victims	45.7%	p=.03
	Non-Victims	39.1%		Non-Victims	29.8%	
Sex						
Males -	Victims	64.3%	p>.10	Victims	64.2%	p=.01
	Non-Victims	54.0%		Non-Victims	44.0%	
Females -	Victims	35.7%		Victims	35.8%	
	Non-Victims	46.0%		Non-Victims	56.0%	
Race						
Whites -	Victims	92.9%	p .10	Victims	69.1%	p=.08
	Non-Victims	87.4%		Non-Victims	56.0%	
Blacks -	Victims	7.1%		Victims	30.9%	
	Non-Victims	12.6%		Non-Victims	44.0%	
	Victims N=28			Victims N=81		
	Non-Victims N=87			Non-Victims N-125		

*Defined as experiencing at least one threat, theft, or beating

TABLE III

Perceived Anonymity by School Type and Victim* Status

	K-8		Junior High	
Perceived Anonymity	Victim	Non-Victim	Victim	Non-Victim
Low	100%	95.4%	53.7%	74.4%
High	0%	4.6%	46.2%	25.6%
	(28)	(87)	(80)	(125)
	p>.10		p=.004	

*A Victim is a person who experienced a threat, theft, or beating.

TABLE IV

Perceived Anonymity by Nature of Incident for Junior High Students

	Nature of Incident			
	Theft		Threat or Beating	
Perceived Anonymity	Victim	Non-Victim	Victim	Non-Victim
Low	59.6%	68.4%	40.5%	73.0%
High	40.4%	31.6%	59.5%	27.0%
	(47)	(158)	(42)	(163)
	$p>.10$		$p<.001$	

TABLE V

Perception that School is a Dangerous Place by School Type and Victim* Status

School Perceived as:	K-8		Junior High	
	Victim	Non-Victim	Victim	Non-Victim
Not Dangerous	67.9%	77.0%	61.7%	78.2%
Dangerous	32.1%	23.0%	38.3%	21.8%
	(28)	(87)	(81)	(124)
	p>.10		p=.016	

*A victim is a person who experienced a threat, theft or beating.

TABLE VI

Perception that School is a Dangerous Place by Nature of Incident for Junior High School Students

	Nature of Incident			
	Theft		Threat or Beating	
School Perceived As:	Victim	Non-Victim	Victim	Non-Victim
Not Dangerous	59.6%	75.3%	60.5%	74.7%
Dangerous	40.4%	24.7%	39.5%	25.3%
	(47)	(158)	(43)	(162)
	p=.055		p=.099	

TABLE VII

Junior High Students' Perceptions of Danger by School Victimization Rates and Victim* Status

	Rate of School Victimization			
	High		Low	
Perception of School As:	Victims	Non-Victims	Victims	Non-Victi
Not Dangerous	41.7%	76.5%	84.2%	71.9%
Dangerous	58.3%	23.5%	15.8%	28.1%
	(24)	(98)	(19)	(64)
	p=.002		p>.10	

*A victim is any person who experienced a threat or beating

TABLE VIII

Junior High Students' Perceptions of Anonymity by School Victimization Rates and Victim* Status

	Rate of School Victimization			
	High		Low	
Perceived Anonymity	Victims	Non-Victims	Victims	Non-Victims
Low	45.8%	70.7%	33.3%	76.6%
High	54.2%	29.3%	66.7%	23.4%
	(24)	(99)	(18)	(64)
	p=.039		p=.002	

*A victim is anyone who experienced a threat or a beating.

TABLE IX

Junior High Students' Justification of Violence* by

School Victimization Rates and Victim** Status

	Rate of School Victimization			
	High		Low	
Is Violence Justified?	Victims	Non-Victims	Victims	Non-Victims
No	42.1%	39.6%	42.9%	51.5%
Yes	57.9%	60.4%	57.1%	48.5%
	(38)	(101)	(21)	(101)
	p>.10		p>.10	

*This analysis uses students measured in the Spring of seventh grade since this is the only time justification of violence was measured.

**A victim is any person who experienced a threat or beating.